

Peepal Pilgrimage, February 2020

On a morning walk, I chanced upon a Bodhi sapling coming up in a rock wall along my route. Its shiny green, heart-shaped leaves were unmistakable for identifying this plant. I had to smile at its beauty and marvel at its resilience and determination to push aside the rocks through to the sun. It reminded me of the necessity of plants to push toward light in order to survive. The little plant made me think that it is the same with all of us. Perhaps we too have no choice but to find the light.

Introduction

I am beginning to write about my experiences on the Peepal pilgrimage of February 2020. It has been the journey of a lifetime, maybe a lifetime in the making much as we spend our lives dreaming about and preparing for some grand adventure that we hope one day will happen. When it does happen, we marvel that it has actually taken place and we have survived. My writing now is about reflecting on what occurred, how it happened, and how I have been changed by it.

Beginnings of a Seed Planted

Having been a student of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh since the 1990s, I have spent years learning mindfulness meditation and the teachings of the Buddha. But I can say that my interest in going on a pilgrimage to see the sacred sites of the Buddha did not really occur until Shantum Seth and his family came to Hawaii. They were completing a tour of the US, ending in Hawaii before returning to their home in Delhi. Shantum offered a presentation *In the Footsteps of the Buddha*, on what his pilgrimage was about. He presented a slideshow and told wonderful stories about the trip to India. My curiosity was piqued. It would be many years before that seed was allowed to flourish and bloom.

In the years between, I went on many meditation retreats mostly in the US and Plum Village in France, became a dharma teacher in Thay's tradition, and continued studying Buddhism. In conjunction with a mindfulness retreat in the foothills of Japan in 2015, my sangha brother Mitchell Ratner and I did a pilgrimage in Shikoku, a smaller island which featured the 88 temples of Kūkai (also known as Kōbō-Daish) the founder of the Shingon Buddhist sect. Over a few days, we walked to 10 temples along the south shore of the island. It was my first opportunity to be a pilgrim ("*henro*") walking in the footsteps of a renowned teacher. Carrying day pack and walking the route, I found it challenging but began thinking of doing an India trek.

That opportunity came up rather unexpectedly. Reconnecting with an old college friend, Rod, and speaking about Buddhism, we talked about Shantum's pilgrimage tour. Both of us shared the website, talked about the possibilities and out of the blue, Rod decided in the fall he wanted to do it that upcoming spring. "We aren't getting any younger so do you want to do it?" I remember thinking "This is crazy but hey, maybe this is it." I decided yes and knew that there was no better person with whom to go on pilgrimage.

Preparation

I suspect that any grand adventure begins once you commit to doing it. The easy part is deciding that you want to make the trip. Then all the thoughts – mostly fears, anxiety and other concerns come up to discourage and dissuade your desires. It is after all a mind game to want to do something like this. Make no mistake, there were actual challenges in preparing like getting the necessary visas (often frustrating doing online), ensuring that you have what is needed to keep up the travel schedule (e.g., Am I in shape? How should we be training?), getting all the necessary shots (e.g., Should we take malaria shots as a precautionary measure? What about Hep A and Hep B?), packing the right clothes (e.g., Should I bring a raincoat and umbrella? What about face mask, compression socks, sanitary wipes, diarrhea and other meds?). These all needed attention to prepare.

Embarking on the journey

Early morning on Wednesday February 5th, we left Honolulu enroute to Delhi through San Francisco on a transpolar flight traversing halfway around the globe. We were as ready as we would ever be.

The first leg of the flight was uneventful as both of us had flown frequently to the West Coast. The second leg from San Francisco involved several hours of wait time that extended even longer to accommodate a disembarking passenger. After waiting in the plane, we later returned to the terminal gate. We took the opportunity to meet fellow passengers, many Indian nationals headed home. Soliciting advice about traveling safely in India, we learned about a kind of bottled water to drink, necessary precautions with food, sanitary conditions, and such that we might want to try. It became a bit of a party in that terminal gate as we waited for our flight.

Our late departure meant an even later arrival in Delhi, followed up with long lines at customs and immigration. Both of us were totally exhausted arriving early on the 7th of February, nearly 28 hours after we had departed from home. How wonderful to be greeted by our guide and a driver from Shantum's tour company and taken immediately to our Park Hotel, no questions asked and no difficulties encountered getting to a clean hotel room and bed.

Fellow Pilgrims on the Path

During our first full day on the pilgrimage, we met our fellow travelers with our leader Shantum, his Delhi contact Bina, travel assistant Jagdish and other staffers in the company. Everyone seemed anxious to get started and make friends. Sharing names and aspirations, we were all pilgrims together on this journey together – seeking to know more and understand deeply India and Buddhism.

We came mostly from the United States –Massachusetts, Connecticut, Florida, Texas, Washington, California and Hawaii – as well as the United Kingdom and South Africa. Not all of us were Buddhists nor practitioners in Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition; several were long time practitioners in Buddhist and other faith traditions. Each of us were now seekers open to learning from Shantum and each other about Buddhism in India.

This is India

How can any country be captured in one's perceptions? Yet I suppose we try to do that by experiencing the sights, sounds, smells of the place when you first arrive and try to recalibrate to the newness of being in a different place. I felt the cacophony of traffic immediately with the cars, bicycles, motor scooters, and electric rickshaws filling the streets. My eyes and lungs stung from the dusty streets and smelly exhaust pipes. The energetic busyness of a metropolis of nearly 19 million people laid bare before my senses seem to thrust me out of any sense making capability. Introduced to a bustling India in our first few days in the capital New Delhi, this certainly was one part of this country.

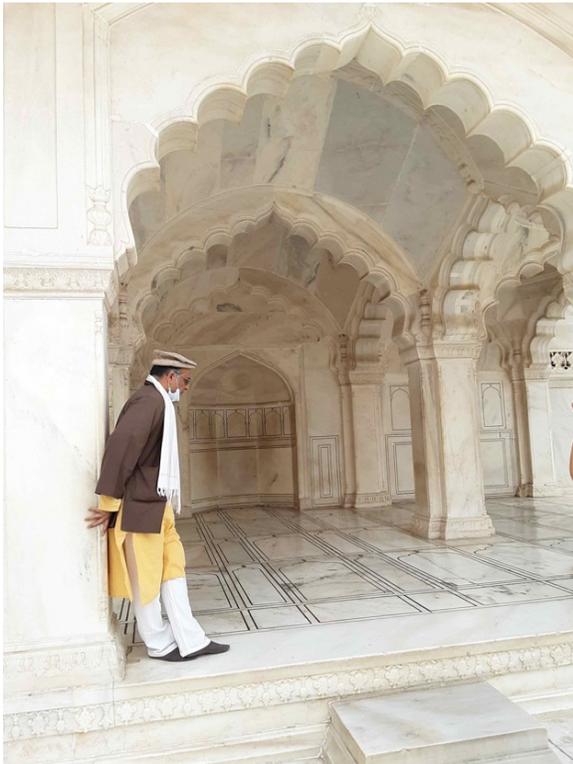
Juxtaposed with that assault to the senses was the quietude. It might seem strange to say so but we were able to experience a tranquility in the early mornings or late evenings when there were few people except our group of 14 fellow pilgrims. Our leader Shantum had such amazing access to places making that possible throughout our time in India. For instance, knowing those in charge of the Mahatma Gandhi memorial in the heart of Delhi, he arranged for us to enter before it opened to the general public. We could experience its peacefulness, recalling the man who brought a new thinking to modern India.

There was also an intimacy of connecting with individuals throughout the tour. Our first dinner together was sitting in the intimacy of Bina's family home in Noida, a suburb outside the city. She had been our contact even before leaving our homes, the person with whom we communicated and shared our anxieties about travel and tour. Her warmth and kindness radiated through emails. That home-cooked Bengali meal in the company of fellow pilgrims was such a warm welcome to India's many charms and delights.

Jagdish was another intimate connection through our time in India. Shantum's right hand person, he was an invaluable travel assistant who made sure we pilgrims had whatever we needed, be it bottled water, a snack along the way, our boarding passes, or immigration paper work necessary to cross check points. He had "eyes" to see us when we wandered off, "ears" to hear our wishes even before uttered, but most importantly a compassionate heart at every turn. Like Bina, Jagdish was one of the many behind-the-scenes people that made our travels easier.



India is an amazing country that was ever perplexing and confounding at every turn. Perhaps it was enough to realize that and know that what you see may not be what really is. Or you might see the centuries of humanity layer upon layer of living, being and becoming. Shantum brought out much of its sociocultural, economic, and political history as he told us about the sights we were seeing on pilgrimage. As well, he spoke of how modern India was changing and adapting to its people and challenges in an increasingly global world. For example, he described the relationship between India and Nepal as that of a big brother to a lesser brother, more dependent on assistance especially after the devastating earthquake in 2015. Neighboring China had stepped in to aid Nepal as well as assert its claim on Buddhist world heritage sites.



Adding greatly to an historic understanding, one of our fellow pilgrims Richard, a Bard College religion professor and scholar, spoke about the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas and the teachings undergirding Indian thought and philosophy before the Buddha. He generously offered us “bus lectures” on several of our daylong rides through the northeastern Indian countryside.

Experiencing India was about taking in its varied religious traditions. We visited the largest Sikh temple in Delhi, circumambulating the shrine with other devotees. The temple feeds as many as 50,000 people in three shifts during the noon time. We walked through the kitchen to see volunteers making chapatis, serving meals and cleaning up afterwards. Another memorable site was the Bahai temple designed in the shape of an opening lotus blossom. Sitting in the last service of the day, we were bathed in the twilight of a rising moon. One last temple tucked

away in the Agra Fort was the small mosque where the Shah spent his last years. We sat and contemplated life's impermanence and our own fleeting existence on the last day of our trip.

Throughout our travels it was extremely helpful to unpack what we were doing and seeing along our pilgrimage, sharing about the day's events and experiences. One poignant discussion was about poverty in India. Confronted by numerous beggars on the street as well as hawkers selling trinkets at the Buddhist shrines, we foreign visitors sought to understand the circumstances and responses we might choose to make individually and collectively. I recall being accosted in the street by a market seller at one time and later at another time by a mother begging for something for her child. At the outset we were directed not to give money but it was nearly impossible to turn away. Later in the trip we had an opportunity to make a collective donation to a woman who had recently lost her harmonium which she played for pilgrims along the route. Shantum's long term relationship with her and her family made it possible to understand her situation and how our donation would be useful to restore her livelihood.

Here is the Buddha's path

Two thousand six hundred years ago, a boy was born to a royal family with the aspiration to liberate himself and others from human suffering. His father hoped that his son would follow in his royal footsteps and become a great ruler instead. But in his twenties, the young scion leaves his luxuriously palace to become a monk. He studies with the best Indian teachers of the time but seeing limitations in their teachings, he strikes out on his own to find a path to liberation and freedom. He attains that realization under a peepal (Bodhi) tree in Bodh Gaya.

That could have been the end of the story. But the Awakened One (*Buddha* as he becomes known) begins teaching what he has discovered, continuing to share the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path for the next forty plus years. He walks from Saranath to Rajgir, Vaishali, Sharvasti and on, making converts and ordaining monastics in what was the start of a new order departing from the Vedic/Hindu practices of the time.

Our pilgrimage took us to the places where the Buddha and his monastics sat, walked, ate, rested, and conferred. We circumambulated shrines and stupas commemorating his teachings, often with hundreds of other pilgrims from different sects - Tibetan monastics in saffron robes, Vietnamese lay practitioners dressed in gray temple dress, Japanese pilgrims in black and white, and regular travelers in blue jeans with backpacks. We ambled through grassy parks created around monuments. We visited teaching sites like the vast campus of Nalanda University which had seen thousands of teachers and students in its centuries as a site of Buddhist learning. We sat under shady Neem trees in Sarnath, rested in the Jeta Park of Srvasti, and ate lunch in the quiet of mango groves just as the Buddha and his monastics had.



It is said that a Buddhist will make a pilgrimage to see the sacred sites of the Buddha – where he was born, became enlightened, began his teachings, and where he died. Those were the sites that we covered on this pilgrimage although not necessarily in that order. This was partly because of where these sacred sites are located in the geography of the country. For instance, our second to the last site was the Buddha’s birthplace in Lumbini which is actually in southern Nepal. We needed to go out of India through immigration into Nepal and back to go to Lumbini.

Meditation retreat on wheels

Dharma teacher Shantum said that our pilgrimage was a “meditation retreat on wheels.” As we rode to the various Buddhist sights on our itinerary, we were practicing bus meditation, riding for six to eight hours on many days. There was countryside to see over dusty bumpy roads. Our stretched-out limo bus was comfortable but that was still a lot of riding. We were instructed to practice looking at the sights outside our window without manufacturing stories in our minds. “See the colors, hear the sounds as they are without adding stories about what you are seeing or hearing.”

Once at our hotels we often did morning or evening meditation sittings with sutra readings and dharma sharing that are very much in the Plum Village tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh’s practice. For those who have been on retreat or traveled with Thay and the monastics, the meditation practices would be familiar. “Stop and come back to the present moment in order to see what is really there.”

During dharma sharing, we had an opportunity to speak about what was arising for us individually. Speaking to this group of fellow pilgrims, we were invited to share from our hearts. I recall our final closing circle in Lucknow, sharing the insights we had had during our travels in original stories, poems, and haiku. Shantum like an experienced orchestra conductor managed to have us laughing in one moment, crying in the next, and pondering the mysteries of the human heart.



Precious gems

If I had to pick key incidents or episodes that were personally meaningful to me on this pilgrimage, I might select these four precious gems. Early on in the tour, I had an opportunity to commemorate the loss of a dear high school friend Leanne who had recently died. I was given some of her ashes to scatter in the sacred Ganges river. Riding in a rowboat beside the sloping hillsides (*ghats*) of Varanasi, we watched the moon setting and the sun rising. We were each given little flower pods with lighted candles of ghee to release into the river, commemorating those we have loved and lost. I scattered Leanne's ashes in the Hindu tradition into the Ganges where the river flows to the north from where it comes, sending the soul back home.

On one afternoon, we headed out to Vulture Peak where the Buddha liked to sit in meditation at sunset. This was a favorite spot of Thich Nhat Hanh and his monastics when on tour. Climbing up to Vulture Peak was challenging for some of us, walking slowly up the steady incline of over a mile. But my greater fear was being able to make the way down especially after dark given my poor night vision. Sitting quietly enjoying the panoramic views from the summit, I recall releasing the fears that I would not be able to walk down in the darkness. Truly I was blessed to be aided by James on the left and Rod on the right, taking each arm and directing every step on that paved pathway down to the bus.

"Osettai" is a Japanese word that I learned on the Shikoku pilgrimage, referring to a gift that is freely given to a pilgrim, often unexpected and meant to support you. One day out of the blue, our bus driver's helper Jitendra gave me a small packet containing Bodhi leaves. Many of these were being sold at the shrines and I had even purchased some. But this gift was totally unexpected and generously given. It moved me so deeply that he would want to share this

commemoration of the Buddha's awakening. I continue to reflect on this gift and what it means for me even today.

On our last full day of touring together, we experiencing the beautiful Taj Mahal along with thousands of others from all around the world. To see this wonder of Mughal architecture is indeed to marvel at the light and beauty conceived by one man for his beloved wife. Even with the sea of humanity crowding in to see the sight, there was a quiet intimacy of the place and its mysteries in mosaic stone and script. How appropriate Shantum selected to read the sutra on love about loving kindness, joy, compassion and equanimity in this place. Perhaps it was a capstone of what this pilgrimage meant to me about being in India with Rod and fellow pilgrims, sharing its complex history, attempting to understand its conflicting present and seeing the ultimate humanity in its people and place.

Coming home and reentry

Returning from such a grand adventure can be as challenging as going in the first place. You return and yet things are not the same but neither are they different. Alerting us to the possibility of culture shock, Shantum offered us suggestions for reentry - taking time to return to normal routines, sharing slowly with those interested, staying connected with fellow pilgrims, and resting physically as well as emotionally in order to reflect upon what we had experienced.

Truly one is changed in ways that cannot be articulated or understood in the moment. I continue to explore what has happened, who I am or who I am becoming as a result of having done this pilgrimage. I suspect that taking on such travel with no expectations at all, may be limiting; conversely if one has grandiose dreams and illusions, then that too is not realistic. I continue to pursue the question of what this pilgrimage means to me and how I have changed in the wake of thinking and feeling more about walking the Buddha's path in India. And I feel deeply grateful for the pilgrimage and my fellow pilgrims.

Shortly after returning, the coronavirus pandemic hit our country causing much fear, panic, anxiety, and suffering, as well as necessitating a lockdown and sheltering in place to contain the virus for all to be safe. The spring of 2020 has not been a "return to normal" as there is no normal any more. In many ways, I think the Peepal pilgrimage prepared me for this. Everything came to a halt and we were thrust into a new world, forced to do things differently, required to rethink the simple tasks of being a home dweller and relating to each other. I have needed to practice the mindfulness skills - stopping, calming, breathing, releasing. No place to go, nothing to do but that. For now, the present moment offers a moment-by-moment, day-by-day simply being here, grateful to be alive and comforted in one's solitude.

Final reflections

Thirty years ago Thich Nhat Hanh went on pilgrimage to India and planted a Bodhi sampling in a farmer's field. Today it continues to thrive in that field. We met the farmer and his family who remembered Thay from so many years ago. To see that tree, I thought of our teacher and the many seeds of love and understanding that he has sowed in so many of us who have read his

books and studied the dharma because he made it accessible to Westerners. Truly the tree grows and thrives in our lives.



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